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'Scratching the wind'

Kindred spirits Gabriele Mirabassi and Guinga forge a musical melange with Italian and Brazilian elements

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

PERUGIA – Gabriele Mirabassi, the Italian clarinet virtuoso, admits that his "musical itinerary" embraces a mix – Mediterranean and world roots, classical music, and jazz – that "not many musicians are interested in."

"This particular combination of musical ingredients is difficult to find," he says.

That he should discover a kindred spirit – composer and guitarist Guinga – an ocean and continent away in Brazil, bespeaks hidden shared histories.

Mirabassi, who's lived his entire life in Perugia – and leads the Italian contingent from Egea Records at this year's jazz festival – speaks of finding part of his soul in that vast tropical place.

Rio's master of melody connects with impressionism's classical roots (from Villa-Lobos to Debussy), playing in Perugia's creamy white and gold-trimmed St. Cecilia auditorium, built in 1634, its cupola creating an illusion of light and space around the tiny balconies in what was once a medieval listening hall.

It was here they recorded Graffiando Vento, which translates as "scratching wind," Mirabassi says.

"In other words, impossible, no? In Portuguese, they use the metaphorical expression 'scratching strings' for playing guitar. We adapted it into Italian with the idea that Guinga's guitar was scratching the wind from my clarinet."

He was also shaking some deep roots loose in Mirabassi's playing, which soars with sweet relief and camouflages his perfectionism for challenging melodies.

Mirabassi's "discographical journey" into Brazil began with a duet with classical guitar star Sergeo Assad and a tribute to Pixinguinga, architect of Brazil's traditional choro music. "Finally, in Guinga I met the personification of what I was looking for and couldn't reach alone."

At 67, the darkly tanned Guinga – dressed in black and toting a guitar case bowlegged as if he stepped out of a spaghetti Western – sizes himself up with typical modesty: "I'm not a big star, but I am a respected composer among musicians."

In a vast nation bursting with music, that is no small deal. Many claim that Guinga's melodic inventions over the last 20 years are nonpareil; dozens have covered his songs (Clara Nunes, Leila Pinheiro, Elias Regina, Mark Murphy, Michel Legrand).

As Brazilian star Djavan said: "It's as if Guinga were the only living student in a school whose teachers are Villa-Lobos, Pixinguinga and Tom Jobim." Percussionist Hermeto Pascoal added: "He's someone who appears only once in a hundred years."

Guinga's recent album, Noturno Copacabana, offers his trademarks: making a handful of instruments sound like a small orchestra, and using strings judiciously as counterpoint to his sensual guitar. Mirabassi was floored by Suite Leopoldina, a 2000 work conjuring voyages from a major Rio train station.

"One of the new century's masterworks! When I saw Guinga with his band it was like, man, eureka, this is it! I don't need to write anything anymore – it's already there in Guinga! And working with him was like a dream. It was like the first time – I found what I was looking for! You can understand how valuable Graffiando Vento is to me. And yet I talk of it as my record – well, I did not write one tune! I just put myself at the service of his music. Because I thought, This is my music!"

Listening to Mirabassi and Guinga talk music is to experience passions that transcend borders. Names like Leonard Bernstein, Vernon Duke, Clifford Brown, Charles Mingus, Olivier Messiaen and Heitor Villa-Lobos are avidly discussed.

They prefer Gordon Jenkins's string arrangements for Sinatra in the '50s over Nelson Riddle's ("More hysterical," Guinga says). Guinga compares pieces by Schumann and Scriabin to Brazilian choros, and Mirabassi finds it "astonishing that in Brazil there's no divide between 'high' and 'low' culture.

"If music is misunderstood, the problem is language. It doesn't make sense to say 'classical' or 'popular' music anymore. Let's divide it into good or bad. For me the best classical composer of the 20th century was Duke Ellington. It's classic American music of its time. I find Ellington mirrored in Villa-Lobos."

It takes Guinga time to get warmed up in broken English, but the words are well-considered. Villa-Lobos, for Guinga, "is like Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Mahler."

"Inspirational melodies like Chopin – life without melody is very poor, very ugly. My family, my wife, my mother, my daughters – my life is in melodies."

His gentle high tenor and fluid guitar are informed "by songs my mother sang for me. The voice is the most beautiful instrument and she had a beautiful, beautiful voice. She's 78 now, doesn't sing anymore, but when I play, I try to feel the songs as she sang them."

He recalls being mesmerized at age 11 by the 1961 Stan Getz classic Focus, framed by Eddie Sauter's taut, melodramatic string arrangements (three years before Getz popularized bossa nova). "I began playing guitar at that time, and I heard Getz's impersvisations in my head." He proposes some wordplay on a familiar tune: "Stan Getz in your eyes!"

"I don't know which is better, the music or the man," Mirabassi says of Guinga. "No, he is first a great human being, then a great musician."

"Sometimes I feel like an endangered species," Guinga says.

Before visiting Brazil, Mirabassi wondered whether the country would live up to his huge expectations, having fallen in love with its music in recent years.

"It was even more than I expected. Obviously Brazil is a country with incredible Third World social and economic problems. But what's more valuable for me is that their music has an important function – deep and complicated, popular and cultivated – in the daily life of the people. It is a means of communication. This is something I miss here in the First World."

Mirabassi discerned Old World roots in Brazil. Guinga's composition Cine Baronesa "could easily be a tropical version of Mascani, Puccini."

"The presence of Italian culture is more deeply rooted there than anywhere outside Italy," Mirabassi says.

Sao Paolo is the third-biggest Italian city of the world, he says, after Rome and Milan.

"Old sambistas were of mixed blood, they had names like Genaro and were black. The European culture that impacted South America was Mediterranean culture."

He rolls his Rs grandly when using words like "great" and "incredible" because he is, of course, an Italian for whom the ineffable mysteries of music and art reign as supreme as Puccini and Pellini.

"For me, it's of prime importance that I know why and how I make music." His epiphany occurred when he and Guinga played Umbria Jazz in 2004 at Teatro Morlacchi, a grand faded opera house seating 600.

"There were 250, 300 people and every single one of them – this is not myth – were crying. It was the first time I saw an audience where everyone held a handkerchief or Kleenex. I didn't need 1,000 people, this was proof enough for me – I mean, this is the music I want to do. ... I grew up and live in a place that was the centre of the world 100 years ago."

Mirabassi, spoons thick hot chocolate, as he has since childhood, at the glittering Caffè Perugia. With his short black hair, he looks every bit the '50s jazz buff, but he gesticulates extravagantly to convey his passion for music. Outside, there's the weekend parade of students in stylish hip-hop gear alongside classic Italian elegance along the Corso Vannucci, and busloads of grandmothers on day trips to the antique market and Perugina and Sanciri chocolate shops.

"What is left here reflects a concept of art that's very clear for me. Italian renaissance painting is a daily lesson for me," he says, noting his idol Piero della Francesca (1416-1492) in the Galleria Nazionale opposite.

Their "incredible technique was a skill necessary to expressing deeply what they could see. A painter is a person whose 'job,' as it were, is to see more than I see. You become an artist when you develop the tools to give other people the possibility to see what you see. As deep as your vision may be, you need technique to express it and offer it back."

A musician, Mirabassi says, "devotes his life to listening, he hears much more than normal people. His goal is to offer this aural vision for an audience by developing a technique that expresses this depth as precisely as possible. I hate this notion that the 'poet' does not need technique. What the hell does that mean? That music is divided between extra-skilled musicians without emotion, and those who aren't able to play but are 'poetic'? B— C! Technique is not an absolute – technique comprises the tools you need to express your vision.

"I reject the idea that Miles Davis didn't have technique. He didn't have the technique to play a Haydn Concerto, but that wasn't him. But he had an enormous personal technique, like Monk. And what about Bill Evans, one of the biggest 'poets' in jazz history, no? Can you say that Evans didn't have good technique?"

Coming from a contemporary music background, Mirabassi describes an avant-garde now curated by the old guard as "conservative and reactionary; modernity has nothing to do with it."

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Mirabassi in Perugia: "The air is good, no awful noises when I wake up."

Suono Italia series brings Egea Records' pure sound here

Egea Records, the associate curator of the Suono Italia series at this year's Montreal International Jazz Festival, is a small label based in Perugia, Italy (site of Umbria Jazz, one of Europe's elite festivals). There it records many of the finest musicians from Italy, Europe and the U.S. in the acoustically charmed old theatres around Umbria. With its catalogue of 40-odd CDs, it has been compared to the larger German label ECM in its quest for pure sound, unfettered by effects.

Egea seeks a synthesis between Mediterranean roots music, classical chamber music and jazz improvisation – it's there in nearly every release.

Among Egea's featured artists appearing in the **Suono Italia series (at the Cabaret du Musée Juste pour rire, 2111 St. Laurent Blvd., unless otherwise noted)**, are the following:

Enrico Pieranunzi, the dean of Italian jazz pianists, has a satin sensual touch in his classically flavoured Egea output: the sunny Racconti Mediterranei, with clarinetist Gabriele Mirabassi and bassist Marc Johnson; Trasnoche, a duet with Johnson; and Canto Nascosto, solo performances on various. Pieranunzi also records for Challenge (the incredibly swinging two-CD Live in Paris) and CAM (Plays Monticone – as a session man he played dozens of dates with the soundtrack master). He accompanies singer Ada Montellanico with former Oregon member Paul McCandless on Danza Di Una Ninfa, a melancholy, oh-so-romantic tribute to songwriter Luigi Tenco, being given its North American debut in this series.
July 8, 7:30 p.m.: Danza Di Una Ninfa; and **July 9, at 5 and 10 p.m.:** solo piano – at Chapelle Historique du Bon Pasteur, 100 Sherbrooke St. E.

Gabriele Mirabassi's sinuous clarinet has made its presence felt on more Egea records than any other musician. Aside from Graffiando Vento, a duet with guitarist Guinga (see accompanying story on Page 7), this daring virtuoso is also heard with Brazilian modern-classical guitar great Sergio Assad (on Velho Retrato), accordionist Gianni Coscia and guitarist Batista Lena (on the colourful, tasty Come Una Volta), and Steve Swallow and John Taylor (on the elegantly abstract Egea disc New Old Age).
July 5, 7 p.m.: Graffiando Vento, with Guinga; and **July 8, 9:30 p.m.:** Di Mezzo Il Mare – Egea Orchestra plays music by Germano Mazzocchetti.

Pietro Tonolo cut his teeth playing in Joe Lovano's mid-1980s Manhattan loft scene; he inherited the latter's clean lines but adds a decidedly melancholic tone. He teams up with American accordion stylist Gil Goldstein and strings in Italian Songs, a compendium of popular favourites that's a bestseller. Oltremare, another outing with Goldstein in a quartet, is more purely beautiful, while Sotto la luna, a duet with pianist Danilo Rea, is rhapsodic.
July 7, 7 p.m.: Italian Songs, Pietro Tonolo – Quartet with guest Gil Goldstein; and **July 8, 9:30 p.m.:** Di Mezzo Il Mare – Egea Orchestra plays music by Germano Mazzocchetti.)

Rita Marcotulli is known as an adventurous pianist, but she's every bit as passionate when singing on L'Amico del Vento, an ambitious string project of central Italian songs with saxophonist Stefano Cantini, which they bring here to the series.
July 5, 9:30 p.m.: L'Amico del Vento.

Marco Zurzolo, saxophonist, comes from the heart of Naples and puts an avant-gardist's world-music touch on 7 e Mezzo, which his quintet will perform here. He's a crowd favourite in Montreal, for which he titled a tune.
July 6, 9:30 p.m.: 7 e Mezzo.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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